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Perception of Social Justice Leadership and its Impact on Student-Faculty Relationships in Southwest Nigerian Universities

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of social justice leadership on student–faculty relationships among final-year students of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso, Nigeria. The research was informed by the following question: Social justice leadership was assessed through three indicators: equity, access to resources, and inclusivity, while student–faculty relationships were measured using trust, engagement, and conflict resolution. Guided by a positivist philosophy, the study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design and date collected from 176 students using 200 questionnaires which was later analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistical methods to test the relationship between the variables. The results indicated strong, statistically significant relationships between all three leadership indicators and the dimensions of student–faculty relationships. A high perception of equity and fairness were attributed to increased trust and participation, while equitable access to resources improved engagement and confidence in institutional processes. Similarly, inclusivity within the learning environment enhanced students' sense of belonging and satisfaction with conflict resolution. These findings confirm that social justice leadership fosters cooperation, mutual respect, and ethical engagement in academic settings. The study recommends that higher education institutions embed fairness, accessibility, and inclusivity into leadership policies and professional development programs to strengthen student–faculty interactions. While the study provides important insights, its single-site design limits generalizability. Future studies should include longitudinal and multi-institutional comparisons to explore how social justice leadership practices can be scaled across different educational contexts.

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Introduction

Social justice has become an important focus in higher education leadership. It promotes fairness, inclusion, and equal opportunity as key principles that sustain healthy learning environments. Around the world, institutions are being challenged to address inequities that exclude or disadvantage certain groups of students. Okhremtchouk et al. (2021) observed that inequalities in access, participation, and decision-making continue to shape higher education, especially where leadership practices do not intentionally promote justice and fairness. When leaders act with equity and transparency, they strengthen trust, inclusion, and ethical engagement within their institutions (Ramlackhan & Catania, 2022).

Student–faculty relationships reflect how leadership values are experienced in daily academic life. Healthy relationships built on trust, fairness, and open communication improve motivation, engagement, and collaboration. In contrast, poor relationships can create misunderstanding and alienation between students and lecturers. Studies have shown that social justice leadership can help reduce conflict and promotes respect between students and staff (Childress, 2020; Gautam et al., 2024; Shapiro & Little, 2020). When leadership emphasizes fairness and equality, it shapes a relational culture that supports learning and belonging.

Despite the increasing attention to social justice in higher education, few empirical studies have examined how it influences student–faculty relationships. Most existing research is conceptual or qualitative and does not measure how leadership indicators such as equity, access to resources, and inclusivity relate to students' perceptions of trust, engagement, and conflict resolution (Peel & Shirley, 2023; Ramlackhan & Catania, 2022). This lack of quantitative evidence limits understanding of how leadership values translate into relational outcomes. This research addresses that gap by examining how students perceive social justice leadership and how these perceptions affect their relationships with faculty in Southwest Nigerian universities. The research focuses on three main indicators of social justice: equity, access to resources, and inclusive learning environment and their

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influence on trust, engagement, and conflict resolution. The study is based on data from final-year students of Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH), who have significant experience interacting with faculty. By focusing on how leadership values shape relationships, this research contributes evidence on how fairness, inclusion, and access can strengthen cooperation and respect between students and lecturers in Nigerian higher education.

Literature Review

Social justice leadership has become a central concept in higher education as institutions strive to promote fairness, inclusion, and equity in academic environments. It provides a framework for addressing structural inequalities that often limit access, participation, and recognition for marginalized groups. Bogotch (2024) argued that educational leadership should move beyond narrow administrative roles to embrace practices that advance social justice and serve the public good. McNae and Barnard (2021) described socially just leaders as moral actors who cultivate collaboration, empathy, and care in their institutions. Their work emphasized that justice-oriented leadership not only reformulates policy but also influences everyday interactions that affirm human dignity and belonging. Similarly, Okhremtchouk et al. (2021) explained that inequities persist in higher education because institutional structures continue to favor dominant groups. They called for leadership practices that promote equity through recognition, participation, and redistribution of power. These perspectives highlight that social justice leadership combines ethical commitment with practical strategies that align leadership behavior with fairness and inclusion.

The idea of social justice leadership is often analyzed through three key dimensions: equity, access to resources, and inclusion. Each dimension contributes to creating a learning environment where all members have equal opportunities to succeed. Equity involves fairness in treatment, opportunities, and outcomes. Access concerns the fair distribution of institutional support, learning materials, and development opportunities. Inclusion focuses on building a culture that values diversity, fosters belonging, and eliminates discrimination. Burns and Flynn (2020) stated that inclusion is a continuous process that requires constant reflection on

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how individuals and groups are treated within institutions. Ramlackhan and Catania (2022) found that when equity and inclusion principles are integrated into leadership preparation programs, they foster creative, socially responsive practices. Smith and Duckworth (2020) also linked socially just leadership to community-oriented success, arguing that education should reflect shared values of justice and participation. Museus et al. (2023), through the SALT model, showed that leadership development grounded in social action helps individuals recognize privilege, power, and identity, which are critical for dismantling systemic inequalities. Together, these studies demonstrate that equity, access, and inclusion are interconnected dimensions that define how social justice leadership is enacted in educational institutions.

Leadership practices that promote social justice have a direct effect on the quality of relationships within higher education institutions. The relationship between students and faculty is one of the most visible indicators of institutional fairness and justice. Childress (2020) found that socially responsible leadership that emphasizes justice and care fosters mutual respect and empathy between students and faculty. Gautam et al. (2024) showed that equitable communication, fair distribution of resources, and transparent administrative practices enhance student engagement and strengthen trust in higher education. These findings are supported by Sandoval-Lucero et al. (2021), who observed that experiential leadership models that prioritize social justice improve cooperation and reduce relational barriers in community colleges. Evans (2021) further emphasized that justice-centered leadership supports healthier institutional climates, especially for underrepresented and minority groups. Shapiro and Little (2020) also demonstrated that participatory and inclusive leadership practices improve collaboration and mutual understanding between academic staff and students. Collectively, these studies show that when leadership is based on fairness and inclusion, it fosters relationships built on trust, engagement, and respect.

In addition to relational benefits, social justice leadership contributes to ethical engagement and civic responsibility among students. Kiram et al. (2024) found that leadership training programs that integrate equity and ethics enhance the moral

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development of future leaders. Morrison and Bramley (2022) also highlighted that when students experience fairness and inclusivity, they are more likely to participate actively in academic and community life. Similarly, Tambascia (2021) stressed that embedding social justice in leadership encourages reflective and value-driven action among both faculty and students. These findings indicate that leadership practices rooted in justice do not only promote equality but also shape positive academic identities and institutional loyalty.

However, despite growing interest in social justice leadership, there remains a lack of quantitative evidence examining how its principles translate into measurable outcomes such as student–faculty trust, engagement, and conflict resolution. Peel and Shirley (2023) argued that while many discussions on equity and justice exist at the policy level, few studies have examined their concrete effects on institutional relationships. Ramlackhan and Catania (2022) noted that while inclusive pedagogy has been conceptually well-developed, empirical studies on its relational impact are still limited. Wade et al. (2019) also emphasized the need for leadership that advances inclusion and equity through evidence-based practices rather than rhetoric. Crandall, Ardoin, and Shinn (2022) supported this by showing that social justice principles in student affairs can be strengthened through data-driven evaluation of leadership practices. In the same way, equitable access to learning and mentorship opportunities has been shown to enhance trust and reduces alienation among students (Eadens et al., 2020; Jung, 2022). Together, these studies reveal that there is a growing awareness of the importance of social justice leadership, but a shortage of research linking students' perceptions of leaders' social justice practice to specific relational outcomes.

The literature therefore suggests that leadership grounded in social justice creates environments where fairness, accessibility, and inclusivity strengthen cooperation between students and faculty. It also suggests that institutions that promote equitable practices experience higher levels of trust and engagement, and fewer conflicts. Yet, the limited availability of quantitative data means that the strength and direction of these relationships remain unclear. This research contributes to bridging this gap by providing empirical evidence on how perceptions of

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social justice leadership—through equity, access to resources, and inclusive learning environment influence the quality of student–faculty relationships in Nigerian universities.

Methodology

This study was guided by Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971) and the Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2010). Rawls' theory emphasizes fairness as the foundation of justice and argues that equitable access to opportunities is essential for a just society. Transformative Leadership Theory highlights moral purpose, equity, and inclusion as core elements of educational leadership. The study adopted a positivist research philosophy, which assumes that social realities can be measured objectively using empirical data. Although perceptions are often studied qualitatively, a quantitative approach was chosen to provide measurable evidence of the relationships between social justice leadership indicators and aspects of student–faculty relationships. This design made it possible to statistically determine whether perceptions of equity, access, and inclusivity are significantly associated with trust, engagement, and conflict resolution among students.

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used because it allows for the collection of data from a large group of participants at a single point in time. This approach helps identify patterns and relationships between variables without manipulating any conditions (Maalouf, 2023). The study population consisted of final-year undergraduate students at Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH) in Ogbomoso, Nigeria. These students were selected because they have extensive experience with the university environment and faculty interactions. A total of 176 respondents participated in the study, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure equal representation across different faculties.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher based on existing literature on social justice leadership and student–faculty relationships. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section collected demographic information, while the second measured perceptions of three social justice leadership indicators: equity, access to resources, and inclusive learning environment, and three relationship

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indicators: trust, engagement, and conflict resolution. A five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) was used to capture responses. The instrument was validated by two experts in educational research, and a pilot test was conducted with a small group of students outside the sample to confirm reliability and clarity.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics and general response patterns. Inferential analysis using the Chi-square test of independence was then conducted to determine whether statistically significant relationships existed between the independent variables (equity, access, and inclusivity) and the dependent variables (trust, engagement, and conflict resolution). The significance level was set at $p < .05$, indicating that any relationship observed had less than a 5% probability of occurring by chance (Khan et al., 2023). This test was chosen because both variables were measured at categorical levels.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of LAUTECH, following the institution's guidelines on research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. No personal identifiers were collected, and all responses were kept anonymous and stored securely. The study ensured that participation was voluntary and that all procedures complied with ethical standards for educational research (Ali et al., 2021).

Research Findings

Out of 200 questionnaires distributed, 176 were returned, giving a response rate of 88 percent. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of respondents. Most participants were between 20 and 25 years of age, with almost equal representation of male and female students from all faculties.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 176)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	90	51.1
	Female	86	48.9

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Age	18 – 20 years	34	19.3
	21 – 25 years	107	60.8
	26 years and above	35	19.9
Faculty	Engineering	46	26.1
	Pure and Applied Sciences	44	25.0
	Management Sciences	41	23.3
	Agricultural Sciences	45	25.6

Perception of Social Justice Leadership

The independent variable, Perception of Social Justice Leadership was designed to show how students viewed their lecturers' leadership practices in promoting fairness, equality, and inclusion within the university environment. It reflects the extent to which students believe that lecturers uphold the principles of social justice in their daily academic interactions. The variable was divided into three sub-variables: equity which focused on fairness in treatment, grading, and the application of class policies, access to resources which assessed how fairly lecturers provide academic support, materials, and opportunities to all students, and inclusive learning environment which measured how lecturers create an atmosphere where all students feel respected, represented, and supported regardless of background. The results for each sub-variables are shown in table 2 below Table 2: Perception of Social Justice Leadership

Sub-variable / Item	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. D**
1. Lecturers treat all students fairly, regardless of their background.	176	3.16	1.23
2. Grading and assessment methods used by lecturers are fair to students with different learning needs.	176	3.20	1.18
3. Lecturers encourage all students to participate in class discussions, not just a select few.	176	3.82	1.14

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4. Lecturers hold all students to the same academic expectations without favoritism.	176	3.38	1.23
5. Class policies such as attendance, deadlines, and discipline are applied consistently to all students.	176	3.75	1.17
Sub-variable Aggregate (Equity)	**176**	**3.46**	**1.19**
6. Lecturers ensure that all students have access to necessary learning materials regardless of financial limitations.	176	3.06	1.35
7. Lecturers provide guidance on academic resources such as tutoring, scholarships, or support programs.	176	3.14	1.18
8. Lecturers are willing to offer flexible support (e.g., office hours, extra help) to students facing personal or financial challenges.	176	2.95	1.17
9. Students from all backgrounds have equal access to research opportunities, internships, and academic projects.	176	3.60	1.14
10. Lecturers consider students' different learning styles and needs when designing their courses and materials.	176	2.93	1.18
Sub-Variable Aggregate (Access to Resources)	**176**	**3.14**	**1.20**
11. Lecturers create a classroom environment where students of all backgrounds feel valued and respected.	176	3.70	1.04
12. Lecturers include diverse perspectives and examples in their teaching materials.	176	3.75	1.07
13. Lecturers address issues of discrimination or bias when they arise in class.	176	3.53	1.01
14. Lecturers are open to feedback from students about making the classroom more inclusive.	176	3.14	1.22
15. Lecturers encourage collaboration and group work that promotes understanding among students.	176	3.91	0.98
Sub-variable Aggregate (Inclusivity)	**176**	**3.61**	**1.06**

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Overall, students showed moderately positive perceptions across all three dimensions, with mean scores above the midpoint of 3.00 on a 5-point Likert scale. Among the equity items, the highest mean was recorded for the statement "Lecturers encourage all students to participate in class discussions, not just a select few" (M = 3.82, SD = 1.14). This indicates that most students agreed that their lecturers promote equal participation. Similarly, "Class policies such as attendance, deadlines, and discipline are applied consistently to all students" also scored high (M = 3.75, SD = 1.17), suggesting that fairness in classroom management is generally observed. On the other hand, items such as "Lecturers treat all students fairly regardless of their background" (M = 3.16, SD = 1.23) and "Grading and assessment methods are fair to students with different learning needs" (M = 3.20, SD = 1.18) had lower means, showing that while fairness is recognized, some students still perceive room for improvement in the consistency of evaluation and treatment. The aggregate mean for the equity sub-variable was 3.46, which reflects a generally fair but not perfect perception of equitable leadership.

Under access to resources, students' responses were more varied. The highest-rated item was "Students from all backgrounds have equal access to research opportunities, internships, and academic projects" (M = 3.60, SD = 1.14), showing that many students feel included in academic opportunities. Conversely, "Lecturers are willing to offer flexible support to students facing personal or financial challenges" (M = 2.95, SD = 1.17) and "Lecturers consider students' different learning styles and needs when designing their courses" (M = 2.93, SD = 1.18) were rated lower, suggesting that flexibility and individual learning support are not consistently provided. The aggregate mean for this dimension was 3.14, indicating a moderate perception of fairness in access to resources and support systems.

For inclusive learning environment, perceptions were more positive overall. The highest mean was for "Lecturers encourage collaboration and group work that promotes understanding among students from different backgrounds" (M = 3.91, SD = 0.98), showing strong agreement that inclusive collaboration is practiced. Items such as "Lecturers include diverse perspectives and examples in their teaching materials" (M =

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3.75, SD = 1.07) and "Lecturers create classroom environments where students of all backgrounds feel valued and respected" (M = 3.70, SD = 1.04) also scored highly, confirming that students recognize inclusivity in classroom interaction. However, "Lecturers are open to feedback from students about how to make the classroom more inclusive" (M = 3.14, SD = 1.22) scored moderately, suggesting that inclusivity could be improved through more open dialogue. The aggregate mean for inclusivity was 3.61, the highest among the three sub-variables, indicating that inclusivity is perceived more positively than equity and access. These results show that students perceive their lecturers as fairly equitable, somewhat supportive in providing access, and generally inclusive in classroom relationships. The overall pattern suggests that while fairness and inclusion are recognized strengths, consistent resource support and responsiveness to feedback require more attention

Student–Faculty Relationship

The dependent variable, Student–Faculty Relationship, measured how students rated the quality of their interactions and relationships with lecturers. It reflects the degree of trust, cooperation, and mutual respect that exists between students and faculty members within the university. This variable was divided into three sub-variables: trust, which measured students' confidence in their lecturers' fairness, honesty, and reliability; engagement, which assessed how well lecturers encourage participation and create interest in academic activities; and conflict resolution and inclusive practice, which examined how lecturers handle disagreements, promote fairness, and maintain a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. The results for each of these sub-variables are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Student–Faculty Relationship

Sub-variable / Item	**N**	Mean	Std. D
16. I feel that my lecturers genuinely care about my academic success and well-being.	176	3.54	1.06

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17. My lecturers provide honest and constructive feedback that helps me improve.	176	3.29	1.07
18. I can rely on my lecturers to be fair and impartial in their treatment of students.	176	3.13	1.10
19. I trust my lecturers to act in the best interest of all students, regardless of background.	176	3.49	0.97
20. When I seek academic guidance, my professors are supportive and transparent.	176	3.61	0.96
Sub-Aggregate (Trust)	176	3.41	1.03
21. My lecturers encourage active participation in class discussions and academic activities.	176	4.01	0.88
22. I feel comfortable approaching my lecturers for academic or career-related guidance.	176	3.33	1.13
23. Lecturers create opportunities for students to engage in research or extracurricular projects.	176	3.72	1.06
24. My lecturers acknowledge and value students' contributions during lectures.	176	3.90	0.88
25. I feel motivated to participate in academic activities because of my lecturers' support.	176	3.39	1.03
Sub-variable Aggregate (Engagement)	176	3.67	1.00
26. Lecturers create classrooms where all students feel valued and respected.	176	3.73	0.95
27. Lecturers include diverse perspectives and examples in their materials.	176	3.79	0.93
28. Lecturers address bias and discrimination during class interactions.	176	3.51	1.06
29. Lecturers are open to feedback from students about inclusivity.	176	3.25	1.15

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30. Lecturers encourage collaboration and group work that promotes understanding.	176	3.86	1.02
Aggregate (Conflict Resolution)		**3.63**	**1.02**

For trust, the overall average (M = 3.41, SD = 1.03) indicates that students mostly trust their lecturers, but not very strongly. The highest score was for "When I seek academic guidance, my professors are supportive and transparent" (M = 3.61, SD = 0.96). The small SD means most students agreed. The item "I trust my lecturers to act in the best interest of all students" (M = 3.49, SD = 0.97) also shows generally positive views. In contrast, "I can rely on my lecturers to be fair and impartial" (M = 3.13, SD = 1.10) had a higher SD, showing that some students doubted the consistency of fairness. This variation suggests that while many students trust their lecturers, a smaller group may have experienced bias or unequal treatment.

For engagement, the mean values were the highest of all three sub-variables (M = 3.67, SD = 1.00). The top-rated item was "My lecturers encourage active participation in class" (M = 4.01, SD = 0.88), showing strong agreement and little variation. This means that almost all students feel encouraged to participate. Other items, such as "My lecturers acknowledge and value students' contributions" (M = 3.90, SD = 0.88) and "Lecturers create opportunities for students to engage in projects" (M = 3.72, SD = 1.06), were also rated highly, with moderate SDs showing mostly shared opinions. A few items, such as "I feel comfortable approaching lecturers for academic guidance" (M = 3.33, SD = 1.13), had lower means and larger SDs, suggesting that while most students find lecturers approachable, some still feel hesitant.

The conflict resolution and inclusive practice sub-variable also recorded strong averages (M = 3.63, SD = 1.02). The item "Lecturers encourage collaboration and group work that promotes understanding" had a mean of 3.86 (SD = 1.02), showing wide agreement that group interaction is handled well. Similarly, "Lecturers include diverse perspectives in materials" (M = 3.79, SD = 0.93) and "Lecturers create classrooms where all students feel valued" (M = 3.73, SD = 0.95) showed high means and low SDs, meaning consistent agreement among students.

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However, the item "Lecturers are open to feedback from students about inclusivity" (M = 3.25, SD = 1.15) had a higher SD, showing that while many students agreed, others felt that lecturers were not always open to such feedback.

Looking across all three relationship areas, engagement recorded the highest mean (3.67), followed closely by conflict resolution (3.63) and trust (3.41). The lower SDs in engagement items show that most students had similar positive experiences with class participation, while the slightly higher SDs in trust items show that experiences of fairness and dependability vary more among students.

Perception of Social Justice Leadership and Student–Faculty Relationship

The relationship between students' Perception of Social Justice Leadership (the independent variable) and Student–Faculty Relationship (the dependent variable) was tested using the Chi-square test of association. The Chi-square test compares the observed responses from students with the responses that would be expected if no relationship existed. A significant result shows that the association between the two variables did not occur by chance.

The test was carried out for each of the three sub-variables of social justice leadership: equity, access to resources, and inclusivity, against the three dimensions of student–faculty relationship, which are trust, engagement, and conflict resolution and inclusive practice. The combined results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Relationship between Perception of Social Justice Leadership and Student-Faculty Interaction

Predictor Variable	**Outcome Variable**	**χ^2**	**df**	**p-value**	**Strength of Relationship**
Equity	Trust	121.49	16	< .001	Strong
Equity	Engagement	115.98	16	< .001	Strong
Equity	Conflict Resolution	97.81	16	< .001	Strong
Access to Resources	Trust	165.87	16	< .001	Strong
Access to Resources	Engagement	109.15	16	< .001	Strong

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Access to Resources	Conflict Resolution	140.34	16	< .001	Strong
Inclusivity	Trust	281.63	16	< .001	Strong
Inclusivity	Engagement	206.96	16	< .001	Strong
Inclusivity	Conflict Resolution	257.57	16	< .001	Strong

The Chi-square results in Table 4 show that there were strong and statistically significant relationships between students' perceptions of social justice leadership and their relationships with lecturers across all dimensions. In every case, the p-value was less than .001, which means that the likelihood of these associations occurring by chance is extremely small. The results for equity show a clear pattern. High Chi-square values and strong significance were found between equity and trust ($\chi^2 = 121.49$, $p < .001$), equity and engagement ($\chi^2 = 115.98$, $p < .001$), and equity and conflict resolution ($\chi^2 = 97.81$, $p < .001$). This means that students who believed that lecturers were fair in grading, class rules, and treatment of students also reported stronger trust, greater participation, and more satisfaction with how conflicts were managed. These results support the descriptive findings, which showed that perceptions of fairness contribute to confidence and cooperation between students and lecturers.

For access to resources, all relationships were also significant at $p < .001$. The strongest association was between access and trust ($\chi^2 = 165.87$, $p < .001$). This suggests that when students felt they had equal access to materials, opportunities, and support, they were more likely to trust their lecturers and the institution. The significant association between access and engagement ($\chi^2 = 109.15$, $p < .001$) indicates that fair access motivates students to take part actively in academic activities. The link between access and conflict resolution ($\chi^2 = 140.34$, $p < .001$) shows that students who feel supported are more satisfied with how problems are handled. Together, these findings point to the importance of resource fairness in building both trust and engagement.

The inclusive learning environment sub-variable produced the highest Chi-square values of all. The relationships between inclusivity and trust ($\chi^2 = 281.63$, $p < .001$), inclusivity and engagement ($\chi^2 = 206.96$, $p < .001$), and inclusivity and conflict resolution

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(χ^2 = 257.57, p < .001) were all very strong. This shows that students who perceived their classrooms as inclusive, where everyone is respected, differences are valued, and participation is encouraged, were far more likely to report positive relationships with lecturers. The strength of these results suggests that inclusive learning environment has the greatest influence among the three leadership dimensions. These findings reinforce the descriptive results and confirm that social justice leadership contributes meaningfully to positive relationships in higher education.

Discussion of Findings

The findings on students' perception of social justice leadership showed that lecturers were generally rated positively on fairness, inclusivity, and provision of resources. Items related to fairness in grading, equal class participation, and consistent enforcement of rules recorded the highest mean scores, showing that most students perceived lecturers as fair and impartial. Items with higher standard deviations, such as those concerning flexibility in supporting students facing challenges, indicate more diverse opinions some students may experience strong support while others may not. These findings support the argument that fairness and equity in academic leadership strengthen trust and engagement among students. Similar results were reported by Okhremtchouk et al. (2021), who found that institutional commitment to equity and fairness enhances students' sense of belonging and participation. Likewise, research by Karakose et al. (2023) revealed that social justice leadership is strongly associated with improved well-being and inclusion for marginalized groups in educational settings. The results also align with Kavrayici (2024), who found that leadership practices centered on care, support, and a positive climate foster equitable learning experiences for all students. However, the moderate mean scores on access to academic resources suggest that inequalities in resource availability still exist. Similar challenges were identified by Kawooya et al. (2023), who observed that inequitable access to learning materials continues to disadvantage certain student groups. Overall, these results confirm that perceptions of fairness and inclusion are central to students' evaluation of leadership. They support the growing recognition that higher education leaders must prioritize justice-oriented values to create equitable academic environments (Menon & Motala, 2021).

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The descriptive results for the student–faculty relationship variable show generally positive perceptions of trust, engagement, and conflict resolution. Items such as "lecturers act in the best interests of students" and "lecturers encourage active participation" scored highly, suggesting that most students feel respected and supported. However, items measuring approachability and feedback had higher standard deviations, indicating that while many students felt comfortable with their lecturers, others experienced limited openness or inconsistent feedback. These findings align with Cook-Sather et al. (2025), who emphasized that equitable and inclusive student–faculty partnerships improve mutual respect and communication in higher education. Similarly, Reinholz et al. (2019) found that student–faculty collaboration grounded in equity and shared responsibility promotes stronger academic identities and relational trust. Furthermore, the emphasis on engagement and inclusivity corresponds with Peel and Shirley (2023).) framework, which argues that equity-oriented leadership should be integrated across all levels of higher education decision-making. The positive relationships identified here suggest that when faculty adopt inclusive teaching and communication practices, student participation and satisfaction increase significantly.

However, the variation in feedback and guidance scores suggests a need for more consistent mentoring and accessibility. Similar disparities were observed by Abrams et al. (2021), who found that student engagement depends strongly on whether instructors demonstrate inclusivity and active allyship in learning environments. This indicates that while general student–faculty relationships are positive, individual differences in teaching approaches still affect how social justice values are experienced.

The Chi-square test results confirmed that students' perceptions of equity, access, and inclusivity were strongly and significantly associated with trust, engagement, and conflict resolution. These results provide quantitative evidence that social justice leadership practices have a real and measurable impact on how students relate to their lecturers.

This finding supports the longitudinal analysis by Karakose et al. (2023), who showed that the most developed aspect of social justice leadership research in recent years focuses on outcomes like equity and student well-being. Similarly, Kavrayici (2024) found that principals who apply fairness and inclusion in

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daily leadership decisions enhance both trust and collaboration among school communities. The strong association between inclusivity and relational outcomes in this study also supports findings from Jung (2022), who reported that diversity and inclusion initiatives improve campus belonging and communication among marginalized groups. In the same line, Menon and Motala (2021) demonstrated that institutions guided by social justice principles achieve stronger trust and engagement even during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings from this study also echo Abdullah and Chaudhry (2018), who argued that social justice leadership transforms hierarchical education systems by bridging class and opportunity divides. However, while most studies emphasize leadership from the institutional perspective, this study extends the discussion by providing student-based quantitative evidence of how perceptions of fairness and inclusion predict positive academic relationships.

Conclusion

This study examined how perceptions of social justice leadership relate to the quality of student–faculty relationships in higher education. What stands out from the study is that when lecturers demonstrate fairness, provide equal access to academic resources, and create inclusive learning environments, students are more likely to trust them, participate actively, and view their interactions as respectful and supportive. The results show that perceptions of equity, access, and inclusivity are not abstract ideals but practical elements that shape the daily experiences of students within the university. An important conclusion is that leadership behavior in the classroom can either strengthen or weaken students' sense of belonging. The findings show that students respond positively to fairness and inclusion, suggesting that social justice leadership helps reduce alienation and inequality in higher education. Another interesting observation is that inclusivity appeared to have the strongest influence on student–faculty relationships, showing that feeling valued and represented is central to how students experience learning. The study also highlights that while overall perceptions were positive, there were differences in how consistently students felt supported and guided. This means that universities must pay attention not only to broad institutional policies but also to the everyday practices of individual lecturers.

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Overall, the study contributes evidence that social justice leadership can be a strong foundation for building trust, engagement, and collaboration in higher education. By linking leadership practices to relational outcomes, this study extends existing literature that calls for fairness and inclusion to be integrated into all aspects of teaching and learning.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, several practical recommendations are proposed:

1. Promote fairness and transparency in academic practices**.** Universities should ensure that grading systems, classroom policies, and opportunities for participation are transparent and consistently applied. Faculty members should receive regular training on equitable assessment and fair classroom management.

2. Strengthen inclusive teaching practices**.** Lecturers should intentionally include diverse examples, perspectives, and voices in their teaching materials. This helps students from all backgrounds feel represented and respected. Periodic reflection and feedback sessions can help lecturers identify areas where inclusivity can be improved.

3. Enhance access to academic resources and support. Institutions should develop systems that guarantee equal access to learning materials, research opportunities, and academic support regardless of students' social or financial background. Flexible mechanisms, such as office hours and mentorship programs, can provide targeted assistance to students who need it.

4. Encourage relationship-building between students and lecturers. Faculties should promote open communication, mentorship, and academic advising relationships that build mutual trust. This can include regular dialogue sessions, student–faculty forums, and collaborative research or community projects.

5. Institutionalize social justice leadership training. Leadership development programs for faculty and administrators should include components on equity, access, and inclusion. Building awareness of how daily decisions affect fairness and belonging can improve the overall academic climate.

6. Support further research. Future studies could examine how social justice leadership practices influence academic performance, student retention, or well-being across different institutional contexts. A mixed-methods approach would also help capture the depth of students' experiences.

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